

## A HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE

### The Execution of Wanda Jean

In some ways it was a typical December day in Oklahoma, or so it seemed. The weather was on the chilly side and the Oklahoma skies a bit dreary and overcast. Longtime Councilman Bob Blakeley lay terminally ill in the hospital where he was undergoing treatment for the melanoma that would ultimately claim his life.

That afternoon, the city manager and several city department heads gathered in City Hall in anticipation of a grim, but obligatory, trip to visit Blakeley. Just as the group was about to walk out the back door of City Hall, a telephone call detained one of the members of the party. No one could have imagined the horror that was taking place just outside the door while they stood there waiting. Later, they would all shudder at the thought of what might have happened had they exited the building just a few moments earlier.

At 3:08 p.m. on December 1, 1988, Dispatcher Cindy Cunningham issued a startling radio transmission: "All officers come to the front of the station on possible shots fired." So began the record of an incident that would eventually end two lives and land the first suspect in the history of The Village on Oklahoma's death row. Making this historic event even more noteworthy was the fact that the suspect was a woman.

The Village Police Department was all too familiar with Wanda Jean Allen and Gloria Leathers. The lesbian couple shared a house in The Village at 2245 Hasley. Any officer on patrol for any length of time had been dispatched to that address for a domestic dispute at least once or twice, if not more. The two had met in prison in 1982 while Allen was serving a sentence for manslaughter and while Leathers was doing time for forgery. Some time later, after both were released from prison, the two moved into Allen's house in The Village. The relationship was stormy to say the least. On December 1, 1988, it came to a violent and deadly conclusion in one of the most unseemly places imaginable, --the driveway of The Village Police Department!

During the morning shift of that fateful day, officers were dispatched to the Homeland store in Casady Square where Allen and Leathers had engaged in an altercation. Later that day, Leathers told Allen that their relationship was over and that she was moving out. Gloria's mother, while hastily helping to pack her daughter's belongings, heard Allen threaten to kill Gloria.

Just after 3 o'clock that afternoon, as Leathers walked up the drive of the police department to file a complaint against Allen, officers inside the department heard what sounded like a gunshot. Officer Chuck Lucas ran outside in time to see Allen holding what looked like a gun and fleeing the scene in a brown Lincoln.

Meanwhile, the delayed visitation party began to make its way to the parking lot behind City Hall to begin the somber trip to the hospital. "I remember walking out

## A HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE

the back door of city hall and seeing Gloria Leathers lying mortally wounded on the pavement”, said City Manager Bruce Stone who was one of the first to arrive on the scene. “I walked over to her and saw that she was lying in a pool of blood. The victim was clutching her midsection and groaning and grimacing in what must have been excruciating pain,” recalled Stone.

Within seconds, firefighters arrived to begin administering medical attention. The .38 caliber bullet had entered her abdomen on the right side and exited her left side. Leathers would die a few days later from gangrene of the bowel.

Wanda Jean Allen was arrested a few days later in Duncan, Oklahoma after one of her relatives called the Crimestoppers hotline to report her whereabouts and collect the reward. Allen was tried, convicted and sentenced to death by lethal injection. Twelve long years would pass before Allen’s appeals would be exhausted and a date finally set for her execution. On Thursday, January 11, 2001 at 9:21 p.m. Wanda Jean Allen became the first female to be executed in Oklahoma since statehood and the first African-American female executed in the nation since the death penalty was reinstated in 1977.

Chief of Police Michael Robinson, a Police Lieutenant at the time the murder took place, remembers the incident well. At that time, he could hardly have anticipated that he might someday actually witness the execution of the perpetrator of this vicious and senseless crime. Robinson reflected on this chilling, once-in-a-lifetime, experience:

*“When I became Chief of Police in 1999 I thought about Wanda Jean Allen. I knew that Oklahoma law dictated that the Chief of Police from the jurisdiction where the crime occurred be invited to attend an execution. I also knew that Allen's appeals process was nearing an end. Would Oklahoma actually execute a woman? Would I want to attend? Would it change my view of capital punishment? In December 2000, I received the letter that I had been expecting from the Department of Corrections. "Chief Robinson ... In accordance with Oklahoma State Statute 22 Sec. 10-1-5. You may attend this execution.”*

*I decided to attend the execution for three reasons. First, as a public official who openly expressed support of the death penalty, I wanted to know whether actually witnessing an execution would alter my support of such a sanction. Secondly, as an adjunct professor at the University of Central Oklahoma, I teach a course addressing capital punishment and I wanted to be able to teach from a broader perspective. Finally, it was an opportunity to see history being made. In addition to the implications on national and state history, this was the only capital case in the history of the City of The Village. Ironically, Billy Ray Fox, the son of a City of The*

## A HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE

*Village Firefighter, was scheduled to be executed in McAlester later the same month for the murder of three grocery store employees during a robbery in Edmond in 1985. Who would think that this small jurisdiction would have such close ties to two executions in Oklahoma in less than a month's time?*

*I had never been to "Big Mac" but I had been to Mabel Bassett in Oklahoma City, the women's penitentiary where Wanda Jean Allen had been incarcerated for twelve years. The state's only execution chamber was in McAlester. I made the two hour and fifteen minute drive and arrived in McAlester around five o'clock. I wasn't due at the prison until seven so I went to have some dinner. At the restaurant, I ran into Bob Ricks, the Commissioner of the Department of Public Safety. He introduced me to the two men with him. One was Oklahoma Highway Patrol Major Mike Roper, and the other Department of Corrections Director James Saffel. Director Saffel talked to me at length about what to expect that evening. He seemed to me to be a very kind and thoughtful man. I was impressed with the compassion and concern he showed me. He knew I was anxious. He talked to me about how I might feel after the execution. He spoke with empathy about all of those involved in this event; the warden and prison staff, the medical personnel, the victim's family, and the inmate's family. He invited me to sit with him while he finished dinner and then follow him into the prison. We arrived at the prison a few minutes before seven. I drove through the gate, noting a few protestors who had already gathered and a host of satellites on top of media trucks parked immediately outside the main gate.*

*Once inside the prison Director Saffel led me to Warden Gary Gibson's office where I waited and watched the clock with Commissioner Ricks and a dozen or so other state and prison officials. At 6:58 p.m. the warden's phone rang. The warden answered the call. "They turned her down? Ok, so it's gonna go." Warden Gibson hung up the phone. " The Supreme Court isn't going to hear her case," he said. The only other possible delay to execution would be a sixty-day stay issued by Governor Frank Keating and he had said earlier that afternoon that such a stay wasn't in the offing. The execution was certain now. It would take place despite the efforts of protestors including civil rights activist Jesse Jackson. Jackson had come to Oklahoma days earlier to protest the execution and had planned to be in McAlester with Allen. However, after being arrested in Oklahoma City on January 10 for trespassing at Mabel Bassett, Jackson was told he would not be allowed onto prison grounds and decided to stay in Oklahoma City and protest the execution from the governor's mansion.*

## A HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE

*I must have looked at the clock on the warden's office wall every two minutes. I wondered what was going through Wanda Jean Allen's mind during those moments. Finally, at about 8:45 we were taken from the warden's office to the high security cell block where death row inmates and other segregated, high security prisoners were held, and where the execution chamber was set up. I will never forget the feeling I had as we walked down the hall toward the chamber. The hallway was concrete, cold and almost void of color except for the uniforms of the few correctional officers monitoring the hallway. As we passed death row, I heard a banging sound. Death row inmates, I was told, were shaking their cell doors in unison to protest the execution. This occurs at every execution. The sound and the vibration of the concrete floor beneath my feet gave me an indescribably eerie feeling.*

*When I entered the execution witness room, twelve members of the press were seated in metal folding chairs in the second of two rows. The twelve chairs on the front row were reserved for Allen's family and friends and for law enforcement officials. I sat down in my designated chair. A prison guard on my left separated me from Wanda Allen's family. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as I waited for the curtain in the window directly in front of me to be lifted. After about two minutes, which felt like two hours, the curtain began to rise. Immediately on the other side, Allen lay strapped to a gurney, a sheet covering most of her gray coveralls. The needles for the IVs had already been placed in her arm. Warden Gibson, who was in the execution chamber with Allen, asked her if she had anything she wanted to say. "Yes I do," said Allen. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do. That's it. Thank you." Director Saffel picked up the phone and said "Proceed with the execution." I could see the chemicals begin to flow through the clear tube leading to the needle in Allen's arm. Allen was still alert listening to the prison chaplain as he read scripture. A few seconds later she looked at her audience, playfully stuck out her tongue and winked. Her attorney mouthed "I love you" to her and she said aloud, "Bet that!" Those were the last words ever spoken by Allen. Moments later, Allen's eyelids grew heavy and then closed; a half smile still on her lips. Six minutes after the execution began, the doctor in the execution chamber walked over to the gurney, lifted Allen's eyelid and looked into it with a small light. He put his stethoscope to her chest for a moment, then looked up at the warden and said, "time of death 9:21". The rest of the law enforcement officials and I got up and left the room. As I was standing, I over heard someone, presumably a family member or friend, say in protest of what she*

## A HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE

*had just witnessed: "reading scripture and committing murder at the same time."*

*As I drove back to the Best Western in McAlester for the night, I assessed how I felt about what I had just seen and heard. I felt irritated that Allen had quoted Jesus Christ with her last words, comparing her execution to His. They had little in common I thought. I also reflected on just how unnatural the process seemed to me; how uncomfortable it was. I thought about how peaceful and painless Allen's death was and how it totally lacked any physical trauma. What a contrast that was to the way homicide victims die."*

Every execution it seems rekindles the rancorous debate over capital punishment. Does it deter crime? Does it bring comfort and closure for the family of the victim? Is incarceration a more fitting punishment than death? Are there situations in which only death, the ultimate removal of liberty, can produce justice? There are no easy answers to these questions and the debate over capital punishment will go on.

Regardless of one's personal views on the subject, justice had been carried out in accordance with the tenets of our often-flawed legal system. Wanda Jean Allen paid the ultimate price for her despicable crime and with her passing another chapter in the history of The Village had been closed forever.